



# THE BURKE AND WILLS EXPEDITION

A critical review by

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## CHAPTER 1

### *Introduction*

The mountains on the eastcoast of Australia had been discovered. The main rivers from these mountains: the Murray, the Darling and the Murrumbidgee were known to flow inland towards the west. Some people thought that these rivers created an enormous fresh water lake somewhere in the centre of Australia. An area of 1600 miles long by 800 miles wide, the equivalent of more than half the size of Europe, was waiting to be explored.

In 1839 Edward John Eyre tried to reach the centre of Australia to find this mysterious inland lake. Eyre got as far as Mount Hopeless, 400 miles North of Adelaide and he was not impressed with what he found. He recommended that no more time should be wasted on this desolate, forbidding region.

In 1844 John Eyre's friend, Captain Charles Sturt, had other ideas. He led an expedition, which included John McDouall Stuart, that would last 15 months. They came within 150 miles from the centre before turning back. Among others Sturt named Cooper's Creek, of which he commented: "I would gladly have laid this creek down as a river, but as it had no current I did not feel myself justified in doing so."

Sturt had been a good leader. No trouble was experienced with jealousies or dissensions. Only one man and a few horses were lost and the expedition had cost less than £4,000. Sturt's system of base camps and small reconnaissance parties had proven to be successful.

### *Reasons for the Burke and Wills expedition.*

In 1857 an Exploration Committee was formed in Melbourne, Victoria to investigate the feasibility of fitting out an exploring expedition. There were several reasons why there was a push for such an expedition. The colony of Victoria was in its first decade of existence and very rich on account of the discovery of gold. It was a proud colony. The population wanted to show off, being the first to discover the secrets of the unknown interior; finding gold, minerals, grazing land, new species, study the feasibility of a telegraph line to London and to find a way to travel from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

In 1860 £19,000 was raised in Victoria to fit out an expedition to cross the Australian continent from south to north. It was known in Victoria that John McDouall Stuart was preparing to travel from Adelaide, South Australia, to the far north, partly to discover a route for a telegraph line. Could Victoria beat its sister colony of South Australia?

### *Preparation*

The Exploration Committee called for offers of interest in leading the Victorian Exploring Expedition. The subsequent appointment of Robert O'Hara Burke as the leader of this expedition was surprising to many. What probably helped in his selection was the fact that one member of the Exploration Committee was Sir Henry Barkly, Governor of Victoria, a strong friend of Burke.

Burke, an Irish protestant who had fought in the British army in the Crimean War against Russia, was then a police inspector in Castlemaine, a large gold prospecting town with about 20 hotels. Burke was described as mercurial, imaginative, headstrong, brave, highly intelligent, an accomplished pianist, humane, tender hearted, a careless dare-devil, in no sense a bushman and was known to have lost his way on a well-beaten track.

The Committee decided to procure camels as most suitable for exploration purposes. This decision was based on the experience of John Horrocks, who in the 1840's had demonstrated that camels were more suited for travel in the Australian outback than horses.

George Landells was sent to India for that purpose. He came back with 24 camels, John King and four natives (sepoys) to manage them. Six more camels were bought in Australia. Landells was appointed as second in command and also officer in charge of the camels, not surprisingly. He upset the applecart right from the beginning by asking and obtaining a greater salary than Burke, the leader.

William James Wills was given the job of astronomer and surveyor.

Dr. Ludwig Becker was appointed naturalist and artist and not to be misnamed, Dr. Herman Beckler came along as the botanist and medical officer.

As foreman, Charles Ferguson was selected and he was given nine assistants, among them were Charles Gray (hired in Swan Hill), William Brahe, John King and the three sepoys.

In total the expedition consisted 18 men; 27 camels; 23 horses, drays, 21 tons of provisions, an extensive armoury, 954 sets of camel shoes, 4 dozen fishing lines, 10 dozen looking glasses and 2 pounds of beads (for the natives), 80 pairs of shoes, 30 cabbage-tree hats, several cases of surgical equipment, parcels of seeds provided by Dr. Mueller (botanist and Lord Mayor of Melbourne), a library of books by explorers Sturt, Gregory and Mitchell, 8 demi-johns of lime-juice (against scurvy), 4 gallons of brandy and 60 gallons of rum for the camels.

To make river crossings easier, prisoners at Pentridge Gaol had been engaged to make a special cart that would float. Should it be necessary to swim the camels, air bags were carried to be lashed under their jowls, so as to keep their heads clear when crossing deep streams.

It was expected the expedition would be away upto 18 months.



*Illustration 1. Modern map of Australia*

## CHAPTER 2

### *Departure of the Burke and Wills Expedition from Melbourne*

Before departing, Burke had been gambling at the Melbourne Club and was unable to pay his debt. There were many who did not agree with the appointment of Burke as leader. *The Age* published letters protesting the appointment of an inexperienced leader without any real experience of the bush. A squatter warned the Committee that he would sue them if Burke's camels scared his cattle on their way north. Another setback for Burke before he left was Julia Matthews, the beautiful and talented operatic star who Burke had pleaded to marry him. She had replied that if Burke returned from this great venture as a successful leader she would listen more favourably to his proposal.

When finally the expedition was ready to leave, six of the camels had fallen ill and were left behind together with a quantity of stores and equipment.

On 20th August, 1860, a large crowd gathered at Royal Park, Melbourne to listen to speeches. Burke thanked the Victorian Government, the Committee and the people for all they had done and declared that it was now up to the expeditioners. "We will never do well until we entirely justify what you have done in showing what we can do," he said.

During the next few days it was found that the camels were overloaded, carrying almost 150 kg each. Several of the wagons broke down. One of the sepoy, a muslim, discovered that no halal food had been provided. He resigned and walked back to Melbourne. The camels were causing widespread consternation. Flocks of cockatoos screamed at them from tree-tops and aborigines fled at their sight. The horses were also terrified of the camels, probably because of their smell and they were kept well separate.



*Illustration 2. The start of the expedition from Royal Park Melbourne. Painting by Nicholas Chevalier.*



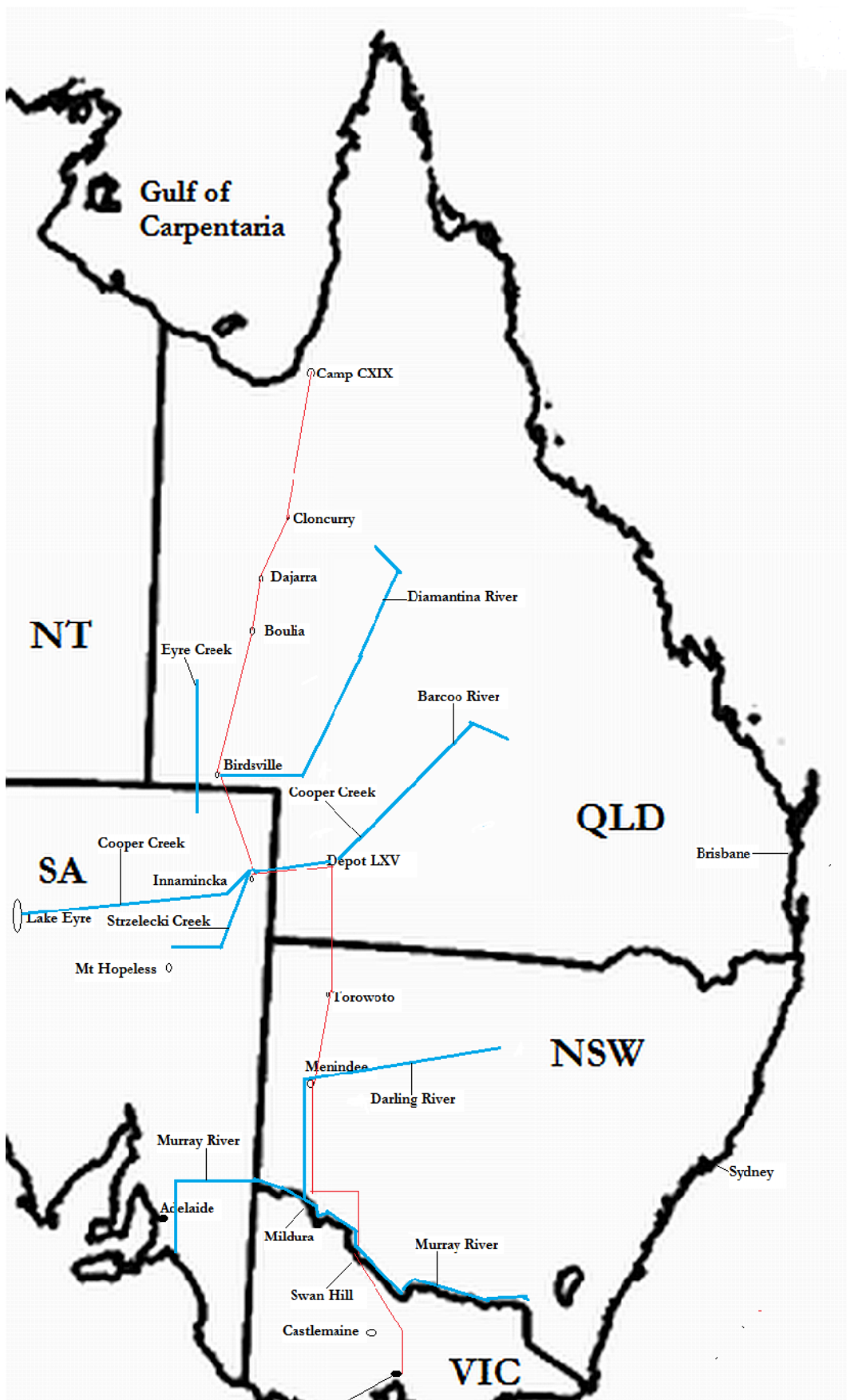


Illustration 3. \_\_\_\_\_ = Route taken by Burke and Wills expedition from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria

## CHAPTER 3

### *The telegraph line and John McDouall Stuart.*

A telegraph line existed between England and India. Victoria, New South Wales (NSW) and Western Australia (WA) were keen to have their colonies connected to this telegraph line. The Australian colonies were still a two months' sea trip away from England. A connection with the existing telegraph line would reduce communication time with London to a few hours. NSW and WA suggested long undersea cables. South Australia (SA) joined in the competition proposing the shortest possible undersea cable to the north coast of Australia and from there overland straight down 3000 km to Adelaide. There was, however a problem that had to be overcome first. In fact, north of latitude 25, as far north as Stuart had been, was still unknown country.

When rich Victoria opened its purse to fund the Burke and Wills expedition, the challenge was on. The SA government offered a reward of £2,000 to any person able to cross the continent and discover a suitable route for the telegraph line from Adelaide to the north coast.



*Illustration 4. The Melbourne Punch cartoon of the race between Burke and Stuart*

John McDouall Stuart, a qualified draughtsman and surveyor, had been engaged by Captain Charles Sturt on an expedition in 1844 as draughtsman. Although unsuccessful in crossing the continent, they came as far north as the Sturt's Stony Desert. In 1858 Stuart was appointed leader of three successive expeditions to the north of Adelaide in search of new grazing land, minerals and the survey of leases for his sponsors, the Chambers brothers and William Finke. After these expeditions there were three more unsuccessful attempts to reach the north coast of Australia. The fifth expedition is of importance as it coincided with Burke's. It took place from January to September 1861. The last one, the sixth attempt, happened from October 1861 till December 1862.

## CHAPTER 4

### *The Burke and Wills expedition travels to Swan Hill, Balranald, Kunchega.*

After 17 days it was becoming clear that they had far too many stores and the expeditioners decided to put some up for auction in Swan Hill. On the recommendation of the local Superintendent of Police another expedition member was taken on board, John Gray. Gray had worked as a digger at the Bendigo goldfields.

On the way to Balranald the wagons were getting more and more behind. The Committee back in Melbourne was concerned about the cost of hiring the wagons and about the slow progress made by the expedition. The camels were again causing problems; this time the males were fighting over the female camels and breaking loose. If that was not enough, some of the men had to be dismissed being troublesome, while Burke himself was getting a reputation of being rather high-handed and liable to lose his temper when opposed. The American foreman Charles Ferguson did not accept a reduction in pay and resigned. (Ferguson later sued the Committee for wrongful dismissal and was awarded £183 damages.) In Balranald Burke made the fateful decision to leave behind, among other stores, the lime-juice so important against scurvy. After Balranald both Drs. Becker and Beckler (both German) were told to forget about their scientific observations and help out with the heavy work such as the daily loading and unloading of the camels with 400 lb packs. Burke, in the meantime was constantly arguing with Landells over the camels which were often straying. And, was it really necessary to feed the camels rum against scurvy? When at Kunchega station, sheep shearers got hold of some of the rum, Burke had enough. No more rum to be carried by the expeditioners! Landells resigned and Dr Beckler followed suit. When later Landells reported to the committee, he stated as his reasons for leaving the expedition, that he had been appointed and given sole charge of the camels, and, it being assumed that his long experience of those animals fitted him for the position, he was to have their entire management. However, every suggestion he made had been sneered at, whilst counter orders rendered him powerless.

Twenty six year old William Wills was promoted second-in-command to take Landells' place. Wills was a son of a medical practitioner in England. A surveyor by profession he had trained some time as a surgeon and had supervisory experience. There had not been any friction between him and Burke.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Menindee. Appointments of King and Wills. Wright is turning back.*

Burke set up a permanent camp in Menindee on the Darling in October 1860, waiting for his wagons to catch-up. It was here that Captain Cadell's paddle-boats arrived with more stores. At the time Menindee was a frontier settlement, a starting point for settlers looking for grazing land. Burke did not waste any time putting 22 year old Irishman John King in charge of the camels. King had been posted as a soldier to India. There he met Landells who was to get the camels for the expedition. He resigned from the army and was engaged by Landells to supervise the sepoy.

As foreman, to replace Charles Ferguson, Burke appointed 21 year old German born William Brahe, an experienced bushman. Wills had given Brahe instructions in the use of surveying instruments carried with them.

At Menindee Burke made another fateful decision by hiring William Wright. Wright had been manager of the Kunchega station (near Menindee). When the station was sold he lost his job. Wright was illiterate, but Burke thought his bushman skills and knowledge of the country to the north would be helpful to the success of the expedition.

Burke was warned by local settlers about the dangers of the extreme summer temperatures to be expected in the direction of travel, to the north. Cooper's Creek was the next destination, 400 miles away. Lack of water and trouble with aborigines could be expected.

To indicate to the rear party their route, a tree was marked at every camp with a B and the Roman number of the camp. After travelling about 200 miles they reached the Torowoto Swamp where they parted company with Wright. Burke told him to return to Menindee, procure a quantity of salt meat and then to follow the advance party with the rest of the camels. Burke gave Wright a letter for the Committee in which he hoped the appointment of Wright as third officer was accepted and he expressed his satisfaction with Wills, his deputy. No problems had been encountered. He stressed that it was desirable that the advance party would be followed up soon. Burke offered each member of the advance party to return with Wright, but none took this offer.

## CHAPTER 6

*19 October Burke's advance party is leaving for Cooper's Creek. (That same month Stuart's party had arrived back in Adelaide from their fourth expedition. They had travelled to within 1000 km from the Australian North coast).*

Under the guidance of some aboriginals the advance party reached Cooper's Creek on 11 November. The first camp on the Cooper was number LVII. They changed several times camp along the creek to escape a plague of rats. Everything had to be suspended from tree branches and flies were a pest as well. The expeditioners finally settled at what was called Depot LXV and a large coolibah tree was appropriately marked. It was very hot, but there was plenty of water to drink and cool them down. Burke and Brahe went looking for water in the direction of the Gulf of Carpentaria, but returned unsuccessful the next day. Then Wills and McDonough, accompanied by three camels tried their luck. They went 90 miles north of Cooper's Creek, became severely dehydrated, lost the camels during the night and were forced to walk for 48 hours to get back to camp. Some more attempts were made without success. It was obvious that Wills was extremely fit. From Cooper's Creek he had travelled nearly 500 miles, mainly on foot.

Mid-December there was still no sign of Wright. Burke considered that he had enough provisions and was keen to get going. The party was split again. Staying put at the depot were Brahe, Patton, McDonough and the sepoy, Dost Mahomet. Brahe was promoted officer and put in charge of the depot. (The following year Brahe reported in writing to the committee: "My instructions by word of mouth were to remain at the depot three months, or longer, if provisions and other circumstances would permit.") Burke expected to return to the depot within the next three months and took provisions to cover that period. Brahe later told the Commission of Enquiry that "The provisions Burke took were barely enough for twelve weeks, and he knew that as well as anybody." Wills asked the depot party to remain there for four months, not three.

Brahe accompanied Burke's party for 22 miles. Before returning to the depot, Brahe said to King, 'Goodbye, King, I do not expect to see you for at least four months.' How true this proved to be!

## CHAPTER 7

### *Burke, Wills and King leaving for the Gulf, 1500 miles to go.*

Burke had been advised by explorer Gregory **not** to travel in mid-summer. His small party was without a line of communication with the depot and carried no maps. The two doctors, specialists in their fields of study, were not there to observe, record and help the sick or wounded. Burke, Wills, Gray and King with six camels and one horse left to follow Cooper's Creek towards Eyre Creek. Burke and Wills worked very well together as leader and deputy, giving orders to Gray and King who just did as they were told. Burke and Gray were in their forties. Wills was 26 and King 22. Burke was unquestionable the leader, while Wills was an accurate navigator. Their small convoy was assembled with Burke and Wills ahead, than Gray leading Billy the horse, followed by King with the six camels. No longer aiming straight north, they decided to go in a north-westerly direction towards the Diamantina River.

On 22 December the expeditioners reached Sturt's Stony Desert. The ground they were walking on was covered with sharp stones, hard on the humans and animals. The flies were a constant nuisance, the landscape monotonous. Without maps, using the compass for guidance, they had to back-track when blocked by swamps or ridges. Sandstorms blurred their vision and irritated their eyes. They worked out that walking for two hours from dawn and at night was the way to go to escape the heat. They tried to camp where there was feed for the camels.

The party's daily ration consisted of 1 lb. of damper,  $\frac{3}{4}$  lb. of dry horsemeat,  $\frac{1}{4}$  lb. of salt pork,  $\frac{1}{8}$  lb. of boiled rice, tea, sugar, but no vegetables or fruit. No time was allowed for fishing or shooting kangaroos. The camels and Billy carried 770 pints of water and each man five pints, which Burke estimated to be sufficient to reach Eyre Creek if no water was found along the way. Sometimes friendly aborigines gave them fish. They found good grazing country, well-watered, suitable for settlement. Each 24 hours they travelled 9-13½ hours. Not surprisingly the camels were bleeding, sweating and groaning.

When they reached the Diamantina they found it had good water in it, much to their surprise. Following this river to a place now known as Birdsville, it was decided to celebrate Christmas there and then, at camp LXXIII.

Following the Diamantina upstream for a while they left it to go in a north-westerly direction crossing the imaginary Tropic of Capricorn. They were now in the tropics and setup camp near present day Boulia. Going straight north they encountered, after almost a month of flat country, the rugged Selwyn Mountain Range. Burke and Wills climbed some mountains to look for the best way to travel. The camels were scared of the mountains and were sweating and groaning profusely. After leaving the Selwyn Range behind them they got down to the Cloncurry river, 500 miles away from their Depot at Cooper's Creek.

A pleasant scenery with plenty of birds and water awaited them, but this was black soil country and the wet season was upon them. The going was getting difficult. The camels and Billy became very weak from floundering in the boggy ground. About 170 miles separated them now from the Gulf of Carpentaria. Following the Cloncurry River down stream, they reached its confluence with the Flinders River. (This was the area that both Gregory and Leichhardt had explored.) At the end of January they travelled along the Bynoe River in terrible mud. Some aborigines they had met during their travels from the depot had been friendly, others troublesome. King had become separated from the others and there was grave concern for his wellbeing. One of the camels got bogged in the creek bed. They were unable to get it on solid ground and had to abandon the poor animal.

At a distance of about 30 miles from the sea Burke decided that it was impossible to take the remaining camels further through the mud. They made camp, number CXIX, along the Bynoe. King, who had joined the party again, and Gray were told to stay put, while Burke, Wills and Billy continued.

## CHAPTER 8

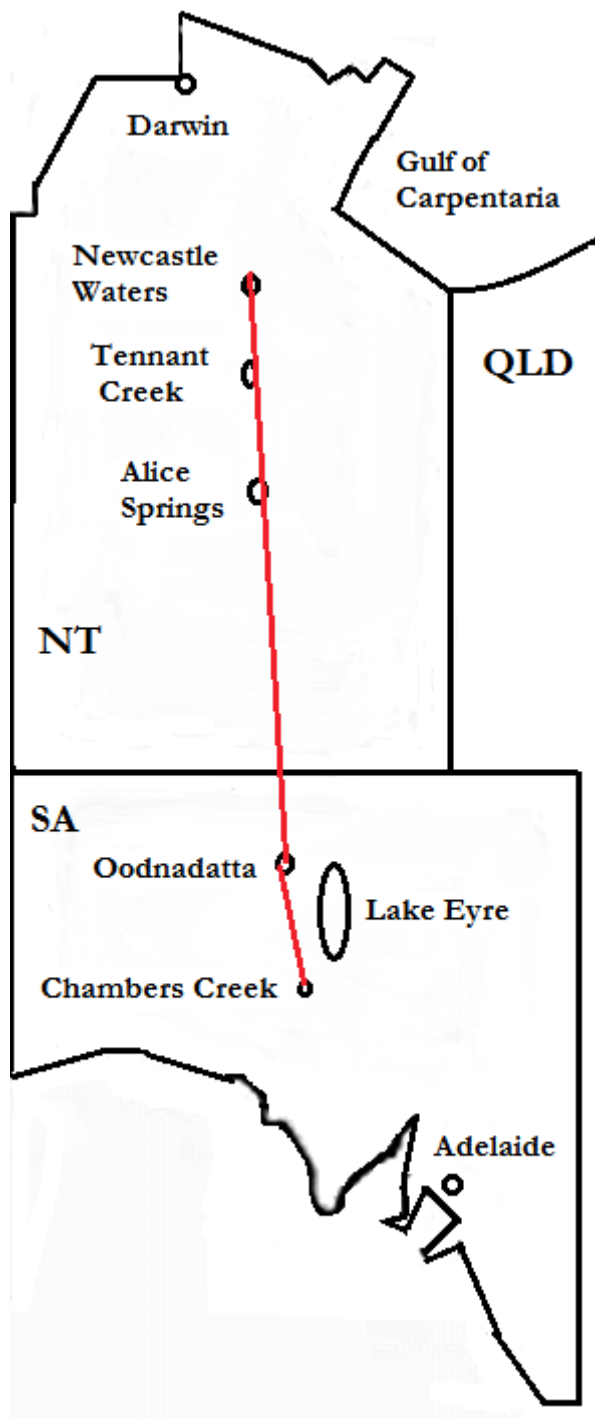
### *John McDouall Stuart, fifth expedition, January - September 1861.*

The rivalry between the colony of South Australia and Victoria now reached its climax. Who was going to reach the north coast first and find a route for the overland telegraph; Victoria or South Australia? Stuart's success in leading expeditions without any human loss and conducted in a responsible manner, earned him great respect. It was Stuart who was given this mainly government funded task in South Australia.

Stuart started from Chambers Creek on New Year's day leading a party of twelve men with forty-nine horses. The party suffered extreme heat, lack of water and feed for the horses. In February, when they were almost leaving the SA border behind them, Burke's party had reached the proximity of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Stuart continued northwards until he reached what is now called Newcastle Waters.

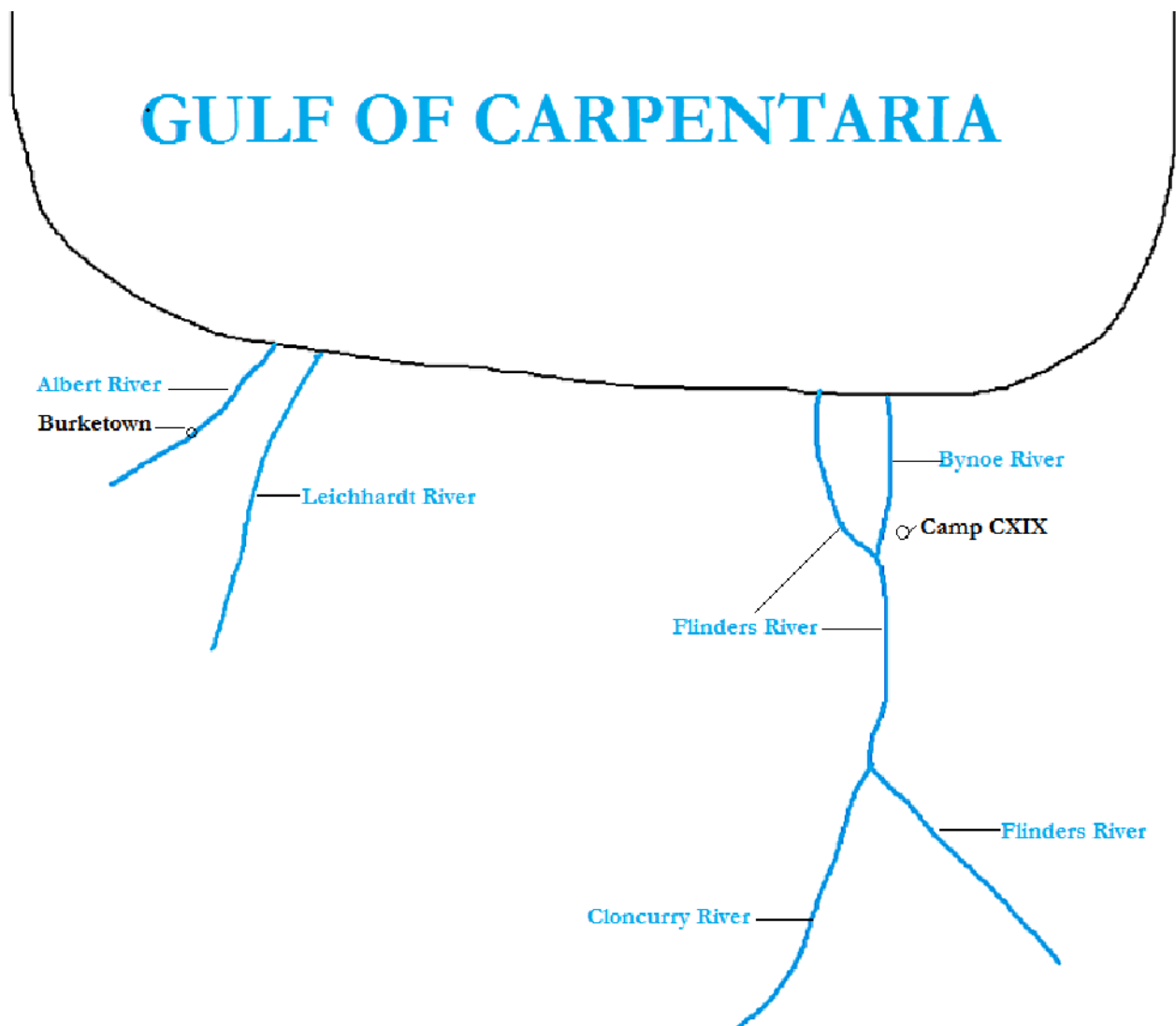
The prudent Stuart, realising at that time that he was short of provisions and the horses in a poor condition, decided to turn back.

When Stuart learned that Burke and Wills were missing he immediately offered to join the search for them. The first rescue teams had already left some time earlier, however, and soon returned with the news that no less than seven members of the largest and best-equipped expedition in Australia's history had died.



*Illustration 5. John McDouall Stuart's fifth expedition, January - September 1861.*





*Illustration 6. Map Gulf of Carpentaria*

## CHAPTER 9

*Burke achieves his goal. Time to go back to camp CXIX!*

*Sunday, 10 February 1861.*

The two leaders left, carrying rations for three days, while Billy carried 25 lb provisions. Billy got badly bogged down several times while the men struggled through ankle to knee deep mud. When they found a track, they followed it to an aboriginal camp. Here they ate yams left behind by the 'locals' who turned up later on and directed the explorers to an easier track to follow to a tidal channel with brackish water flowing from the sea.

Burke was both happy to have crossed the continent and sad, not to have actually seen the Gulf of Carpentaria. They were running out of provisions and decided to rejoin the others at camp CXIX.



*Illustration 7. Arrival of Burke and Wills at Flinders River, painting by Edward Jukes Greig, 1862*

*Tuesday 12 February.*

On this day Burke and Wills rejoined Gray and King at Camp CXIX and contemplated what to do. Fifty-seven days ago they left Cooper's Creek depot. One-third of their rations were left, enough for one month instead of the required two months it would take them to cover the 700 miles to safety. Five camels and Billy could be eaten if needed. Apart from Gray, who was complaining of headaches, they were reasonably fit. Even on a reduced diet they thought they should be able to 'make it'. Before they left, after only one day's rest, they cut a B on a circle of fifteen trees and buried a bundle of books with a note explaining the situation.

## CHAPTER 10

### *Start of the struggle back to Cooper's Creek.*

It was a struggle! Heavy rain turned the ground in a quagmire. Without tents, they had to sleep in the wet for about a week. King was now also complaining of headaches and pains in his legs. They were not progressing as fast as they had expected. Surprisingly, the abandoned camel was found alive along the Cloncurry River and was only too happy to join the other camels. But that lasted only four days. The poor camel refused to go any further.

A huge snake which measured more than eight feet and did not appear poisonous was cooked for dinner. The snake took its revenge! Burke suffered from dysentery, giddiness and was unable to ride his horse for a day. He slowly recovered, but not Gray. The others got the impression that he was trying to get out of doing his fair share of the work.

Burke started to realize that the rations were not going to last at the slow rate they were travelling. He was very impartial with the food. Equal portions of food were placed onto four plates numbered one to four. The plates were then covered with a towel. His companions had to stand with their backs turned and to call a number. That was to be their plate.

On 25 March Wills saw Gray sitting behind a tree, eating gruel. Gray explained that he had taken the flour without permission and that he was suffering from dysentery. Wills noted that Gray received 'a good thrashing' by Burke, however King later said that it had only been 'six or seven slaps on the ear'. From then on Gray was released from his duty as storeman and delegated another job. After forty days they had covered only half the distance required and food was getting scarcer. To stay alive they killed every now and then a camel. This could take a full day but it provided plenty of meat for the four of them to eat. The next day they carried as much of the meat as they could. A few days later Billy was on the menu. Wills wrote: 'We found it healthy and tender, but without the slightest trace of fat in any portion of the body.' (Not surprisingly!) The foursome were getting weaker by the day, unable to carry much luggage or meat. They made the habit of hanging non-essential equipment from tree branches, just in case they were returning. They took it in turn to ride the two remaining camels. To make the going even harder the foursome experienced severe storms with either heavy rain or red dust.

Two months after turning around near the Gulf, Gray had to be strapped to the saddle to prevent him falling off the animal. 17 April Charley Gray was found dead at morning rise. It took his companions all day to dig a three feet deep grave for him.





*Illustration 8. Burke, Wills and King on their way back from the Gulf of Carpentaria. Drawing by Nicholas Chevalier.*

## CHAPTER 11

*At the dig tree, Cooper's Creek. 70 miles to go to Cooper's Creek.*

They were carrying now some dried meat, a couple of spades, some fire-arms and a few camel-pads to sleep on. Burke had given his spare shirt to an aboriginal. Sturt's Stony Desert was now causing extra discomfort with their shoes badly in need of replacement. Keeping a fire going all night was their only means of getting their rags dry. Saturday night 21 April they ate all remaining food except for one and a half pound of dried meat. The next day was going to be an all-out effort to reach the depot at 30 miles distance to finally reach plenty of food and their mates.

Robert Burke went ahead of the others when they neared the depot site and started calling the names of those left behind, but there was no answer. It was 7.30 p.m. when they arrived at the stockade. Ashes of camp fires, some fresh camel and horse dung awaited them. However no life person or animal could be seen. Burke collapsed in despair, while Wills saw fresh markings on a nearby tree.

DIG

and on another tree on one side

B LXV

and on the other side of the same tree

DEC 16 1860

APR. 21 1861

Wills and King dug in the freshly disturbed soil and found a camel box with rations as well as a bottle with a message written in pencil. The message was:

*Depot, Cooper's Creek, 21 April 1861,*

*The depot party of the V.E.E. (Victorian Exploring Expedition) leaves this camp today to return to the Darling. I intend to go S.E. from Camp LX, to get into our old track near Bulloo. Two of my companions and myself are quite well; the third - Patton- has been unable to walk for the last eighteen days, as his leg has been severely hurt when thrown by one of the horses. No person has been up here from the Darling.*

*We have six camels and twelve horses in good working condition.*

*William Brahe.*

## CHAPTER 12

### *What had happened at the Depot?*

When Wright went back to Menindee on 29 October he was under instructions to procure a quantity of salt meat and to take the camels with the stores to Cooper's Creek depot as soon as possible.

At the depot Brahe told his men to make a stockade around the camp to stop the constant pilfering by the aborigines. Once six camel bags disappeared and Brahe had to fire warning shots to frighten the visitors away. He was well aware that past explorers and settlers had been killed in the bush. The twelve horses and six camels had to be tied up at night. In the morning the camels were taken out for a walk by one man while the horses were taken by another man. That way the camp was protected by the remaining two men.

Burke had left six months' provisions behind. Breakfast consisted of rice with sugar, the mid-day main meal: damper, often duck (plenty around), or salt pork/beef and tea. In the evening tea and biscuits. It was a very nice spot where they were camped if only the flies and rats stayed away. They were bored, having not much to do but wait.

In March Brahe became concerned about the failure of Wright to turn up. What kept him at Menindee? The temperature had dropped considerably at the depot area. They experienced very cold nights, thunder, lightning and strong winds. It was becoming decidedly uncomfortable.

Patton was the first to experience the lack of fruit and vegetables in their diet. In early April he complained about sore gums and not feeling very well. The horses needed shoeing, he was the blacksmith and finished this job before collapsing. His arms and legs were swollen and his mouth was so sore, that he could not eat. None of this party knew what caused Patton's problems. Patton was now unable to leave his bed and he kept asking to be taken back to Menindee to get medical attention. It was plain to the others that if Patton stayed at the depot, he would die. Brahe and McDonough were getting swollen ankles everytime they got on a horse. Brahe, McDonough and Dost Mahomet had become so weak and malnourished that they had trouble looking after the animals.

Burke instructions had been for the party at Cooper's Creek depot to wait for three months. Four months had been mentioned by Wills. Now also that milestone had passed and not a sign of Wright or Burke.

## CHAPTER 13

### *Brahe's dilemma. Leaving Cooper's Creek Depot.*

What was Brahe to do? Burke had told Brahe that if he had not returned in three months' time, he could be considered perished. But what if Burke had been picked up by a boat at the Gulf of Carpentaria or had made his way to the settled areas in Queensland? How long was his party to remain at the depot? Were Wright's and Burke's parties safe and well and did they expect Brahe to return with his party to Menindee? It was true, the meagre rations at the depot were still sufficient. The 23 year old Brahe was in a real quandary what to do.

Brahe reasoned that Burke's party could not possibly survive on the rations they had taken to last this length of time. They were either dead or had found their way out via Queensland. He also realised that in the unlikely event Burke managed to get back to the depot, Brahe had to leave part of his rations behind in the cache. If he waited any longer his own party would starve on the way to Menindee.

Brahe finally made up his mind. They were leaving next Sunday 21 April! Provisions were divided, the important note, written by Brahe explaining his situation was put in a bottle. The cache containing 50 lbs of flour, 50 lbs of oatmeal, 50 lbs of sugar and 30 lbs of rice was dug, camel dung raked over it to disguise it from the aboriginals and as instructed, Burke's sealed letters were burnt. It is not well understood why Brahe wrote in the note that he had six camels and twelve horses in good working condition. It looked like he was given the impression that he had looked well after the animals, whereas two camels, suffering from scap, died two weeks later.. Burke, reading the note nine hours after Brahe's party left, thought it impossible to catch up with a rested party with fit animals. The depot party left with Patton lifted and strapped onto the quietest camel, travelling slowly on account of Patton. They followed the Cooper upstream. Camp was set up early at 5 p.m. At that stage only fourteen miles separated Burke from Brahe. If Burke only knew!

Brahe, using the compass given to him by Wills, led his party without delay across the dry country side to the waterholes of Bulloo. It meant that they had been 100 hours without water. While his party was recuperating, Brahe went scouting. Following some fresh horse tracks he met Mr. Hodgkinson, it was 28 April. (This William Hodgkinson had been employed by Burke as a member of the Supply Party, led by Wright. Hodgkinson then travelled with Wright from Menindee to Bulloo.) Brahe was then led by Hodgkinson to Wright's camp and later placed his own party under Wright's command.

Six months had passed since Wright and Brahe saw each other last and Brahe was naturally keen to find out why Wright had not gone to the Cooper's Creek depot as planned.

## CHAPTER 14

### *Wright's excuses. The situation at Menindee.*

Wright explained that after leaving Burke on 29 October he returned to Menindee in six days, to find it in a shambles. Half the stores were scattered around; the animals left were in a poor condition, some of the men were not well. And to top that off there were financial problems with the expedition. Burke had written dozens of cheques on the way to Menindee which had been dishonoured. Nothing could be bought, the expedition was bankrupt in his opinion. Wright imagined that salaries might not be paid if the expedition had been abandoned by the Committee in Melbourne. Another indication that all was not well with the expedition was the lack of acknowledgement of receipt of various parcels sent by Dr. Ludwig Becker to the Committee, containing notes, specimens and drawings.

All this put Wright in a quandary, as Brahe could well appreciate. Wright was expected to move the stores to the depot at Cooper's Creek using sick animals, with his men not knowing whether they were still employed or even getting paid for going in the outback. Wright himself had been appointed by Burke as the leader of the re-supply party, subject to the Committee's approval. No confirmation of his appointment had been received.

Yet another complication was the arrival of a trooper from Swan Hill with important dispatches for Burke which had to be handed to Burke personally. Lyons, the trooper was told that it might be dangerous for him to go by himself to Cooper's Creek. For safety's sake Wright provided Lyons with four horses and one of his men, McPherson. In addition an Aboriginal tracker called Dick was to guide them. Six weeks later Dick returned to Menindee with the only news received so far, and it was far from good news. Lyons and McPherson were stranded in the Torowoto district, their horses knocked up and the men starving. They had not reached Burke. Dr. Beckler who had resigned and was waiting for his replacement volunteered to go together with Dick to rescue the two men.

Burke had little regard for the doctor who he thought was scared to go in the outback, but the good doctor did return with the two men on 5 January.

Wright, of course could have done more for Burke if he had tried a bit harder. Others even urged him to go to the Cooper before the waterholes had dried up, but he took the easy way out, blaming others. He lived with his family in comfortable accommodation at Kunchega Station, fourteen miles away from the camp. He would not visit the camp sometimes for a week and was obviously not the right person for the leader's job.

The Menindee Pub owner Thomas Paine did well out of the expedition troubles. The twenty gallons of rum specially procured for the camels had been sold to him for £16. The men at the depot were frequent customers, which he surely did not mind.

The lack of communication between the people at the camp and the Committee in Melbourne was working particularly on the nerves of Dr. Ludwig Becker. On 22 January 1861 he wrote in his diary that five months had passed since they left Melbourne. Not once did he receive any acknowledgment from the Committee about his forwarded specimens, drawings and diaries.

Wright still had not received any word from the Committee and decided to send them a letter hand-delivered by William Hodgkinson, who had become the foreman of the base camp. In this letter Wright expressed concern for the well-being of Burke and his companions as he had not been able to move the stores to Cooper's Creek, on which Burke counted.



## CHAPTER 15

*William Hodgkinson. The rear party finally moves under Wright's leadership, in the direction of Cooper's Creek.*

William Hodgkinson was a more energetic person than most of the others Wright had left behind in the camp. He rode the 400 miles to Melbourne in eleven days and arrived on New Year's eve 1860, much to the surprise of the Committee members. Why was he coming down from Menindee? No reply had been given to Burke's letter, because Wright was to arrive at Cooper's Creek depot shortly after Burke's departure from there. Hodgkinson was given £400 in cash to buy 10 additional horses and 150 sheep (to replace the dried beef that had been eaten by white ants while in storage at Menindee). Hodgkinson did not celebrate the New Year in Melbourne, but left that same night for Menindee. On his arrival on 9 January the camp became hectic. Horses were bought from surrounding stations and stores were packed. The sheep were not bought as it was too late in the season to find food for them on the way to Cooper's Creek depot. The departure was delayed by two days on account of Wright waiting for a boat to take his family to Adelaide.

It was now three months since Burke left Menindee and finally on 26 January the re-supply party left at night, Wright, Dr. Beckler (who had changed his mind about resigning), Dr. Becker, Hodgkinson, Stone, Smith, Purcell and the sepoy Belooch. With them to carry the stores were ten camels and thirteen horses, all in a good condition.

It had taken Burke's small party **23** days to cover the distance between Menindee on the Darling and Depot LXV on Cooper's Creek. Wright had departed at night to escape the excessive heat of the day. His convoy was large, heavily laden and it was now the high summer. Finding water on the way was going to be a problem. They lacked the abilities of Wills, the surveyor to guide them and Wright was a poor leader, not highly regarded by his companions.

Soon three horses died of exhaustion. Rats got into their stores and five members of the party became ill. Wright went ahead looking for water, the others followed increasing slower. 12 February they were half way at Torowoto where they rested for two days. The next eighteen miles took them to, what looked like, a waterless plain. Wright accompanied by Smith went ahead to look for water, which they found. However it was only a puddle and when the animals were taken there, the extremely thirsty horses made the puddle into a mass of mud. The unlucky camels had to be taken back to Torowoto to get a drink. The next eleven days Wright together with Smith and Belooch made it to Bulloo. They were now 80 miles from Cooper's Creek. He waited for Becker, Stone and Purcell who were in a bad way, suffering from scurvy and drinking poor quality water, to join him at Bulloo. Smith and Belooch were suffering similarly. It was now mid-April.

Dr. Becker, Stone and Purcell were unable to continue after sixty-nine days from Menindee. The party experienced some trouble with aboriginals who indicated that Wright's party was camping on their land and they were not welcome. 27 April a group of forty to fifty aboriginals approached the camp in a threatening way and could only be persuaded to go away after being fired at.

Stone and Purcell both station hands and as such accustomed to the hot weather, poor food, bad water and tough conditions in general, passed away. Although Dr. Beckler was in attendance, he could not do anything for those suffering from scurvy as he did himself. There was not any fruit and vegetables to give them. Next day Wright decided to carry the unconscious Dr. Becker on a camel back to Torowoto, but before he left, Brahe, McDonough, Dost Mahomet and Patten unexpectedly turned up. (Chapter 13 refers). The new arrivals were in poor health, Patten was dying.

That night Becker died. He was described as a gifted man, mild, sensitive and cooperative, who had not expected this expedition to be a race and life threatening. He, Stone and Purcell were buried on 30 April. This dispirited group of men in poor health, carrying dying Patten strapped to a camel returned to Menindee. Some of the animals were also on their last legs. The stragglers did not get far and set up camp at Bulloo.

Brahe was still worried whether he had done the right thing to Burke. Was it not possible that Burke had returned to Cooper's Creek? Should not he go back to make sure that the aboriginals had not interfered with the cache, just for his piece of mind. The cache was only 80 miles away. He put it to Wright that they should both go to the Depot at Cooper's Creek to investigate. The others could stay put and hopefully recuperate in the camp. Wright agreed. Again, it was Brahe who showed leadership, not Wright who was supposed to be the leader.

3 May Wright and Brahe left with three horses. It took them only five days to reach the depot. Little did they know that Burke had left only fifteen days earlier. The place was deserted. Brahe went inside the stockade and found everything as he had left it with the camel dung raked over the ground as before. The visible camel tracks he presumed to be from his own camels when he left the depot last. The three fresh campfires would likely be from aboriginals. Brahe, unfortunately did not notice that the rake was in a different spot, nor the glass of the broken bottle on top of the stockade, nor the rags that King had nailed to the stockade and neither the square that had been cut out of the leather door. King had left behind a billy which was either not noticed or not thought of as significant.

Brahe was now satisfied that he had acted correctly by leaving the depot the way he did on 21 April. The cache was not dug up by Brahe or Wright as they did not want aboriginals to notice the freshly disturbed soil. They also did not see any use in adding another message to the bottle or marking the tree to indicate their return to the depot. If they had dug up the cache, they would have discovered the food gone and would have found Burke's letter, written only fifteen days earlier. Their horses could easily have caught up with Burke, Wills and King. Brahe and Wright had only taken minimal food with them, but Burke's party had the contents of the cache. The two men only stayed for half an hour before returning to Bulloo and rejoining their exhausted men on 13 May.

Brahe and or Wright could have gone on horseback to get more provisions. But, alas, it was not to be. Brahe realised that it had now been nearly five months since he last saw Burke's group. Surely they had perished or had found a way out by ship or through Queensland.

## CHAPTER 16

### *Burke, Wills and King at the Depot on the Cooper, 22 April.*

Now let us remember that the three remaining explorers had struggled enormously the last 30 miles, in one long day expecting to reach safety and rest at the depot at Cooper's Creek. What did they find? A box with rations and the message that their would-be rescuers had left that very morning. Four months Brahe and his men had waited, to leave perhaps eight hours before the return of the exhausted Burke, Wills and King. If Grey had not died, they would have arrived one day earlier, in time to meet up with Brahe. The day before arriving at the depot, King had been shooting hawks and crows for a short time and aborigines had been following the stragglers for quite a while. Obviously the shots had not been heard at the depot and neither did the aborigines tell them of their imminent arrival. Where was Wright?



*Illustration 9. Painting by John Longstaff depicting the arrival of Burke, Wills and King at Cooper's Creek. The painting has been criticized as showing markings on the tree which are incorrect. The marks on the west side of the tree were as follows: on a limb leaning northwards from the butt, showing dates of arrival and departure of the party to and from the depot: DEC 16 1860 APR 21 1861. On the east side of the tree is Brahe's marking B over LXV.*

The painting by John Longstaff in 1907 shows Burke staring into the distance, Wills sitting down dejected and King lying down exhausted. The two worn out camels are in the background. After a while Burke addressed his companions with the following question: "Are you able to march on through the night?" Their answer was "no", and Burke had to admit that he too was too exhausted. But what to do then? Eat first, rest second and then, try to catch up with Brahe was the opinion of Wills. Burke was against that. He reminded the other two what Brahe wrote in the note. The camels and horses were in a good condition, while theirs were exhausted. Water was going to be hard to come by en route to Menindee, 400 miles away. Burke suggested to follow Cooper's Creek to the settlement of Mount Hopeless, only 150 miles distance. Fellow explorer Gregory had travelled that distance in a week, he reminded them. King agreed and Burke made the decision to go to Mount Hopeless.

King had to creep on hands and knees to fill his billy from the creek. After eating some of their fresh rations, which amounted to one month's supply, they fell asleep.

Next morning Burke wrote a note explaining what had expired and that they would be lucky to travel four or five miles a day, in their worn out condition. He also expressed his disappointment that the depot had been abandoned. This note was put in a bottle and buried. Brahe's bottle that had been broken by King to get his message, was placed on top as an indication that they had returned. King hung a few rags and pieces of leather on some nails driven into the stockade.

## CHAPTER 17

*23 April Burke, Wills and King departing Cooper's Creek depot, heading for Mt Hopeless.*

Burke, Wills and King left in their tattered clothes down Cooper's Creek, the opposite direction to Brahe's. They made five miles that first day and found good feed for the camels. Another plus was the appearance of a group of aboriginals. 12 pound of fresh fish was swapped for some matches and bits of leather. The next day they were given fish again by the aboriginals, this time in exchange for some sugar. Burke and his companions's condition improved, as did the two camels.

They now came in a tricky area where Cooper's Creek had many dry channels which caused them to back-track many times. Another calamity struck the weary men when their best camel got stuck in the mud beside a waterhole. They tried desperately to extricate the poor animal from the clay which was bottomless. The camel had supported them covering three thousand miles and now it had to be abandoned. Next morning they put the camel out of its misery by shooting it. The rest of the day as well as the next they spent cutting off as much meat as they could, cut it into strips and dried it in the sun. Now there was only one camel left to carry the stores and each man had to shoulder more of their bedding. On 2 May they were given more fish and nardoo cakes by aboriginals in exchange for fish hooks and sugar. Rajah, the camel was on his last legs and to reduce the weight it was carrying, they threw away some luxuries like ginger, tea, cocoa, sugar and some tin plates. Would that have made much difference in weight?



*Illustration 10. Burke and Wills on the Way to Mount Hopeless, painting by George Washington Lambert, 1907.*

Two weeks had past since they left the depot and they could not find their way to Mt Hopeless. Burke and Wills went scouting while King looked after Rajah. Almost every day friendly aboriginals were met who tried to look after these strangers. More fish and nardoo cakes were given but also, what Wills referred to as bedgery or pedgery. This drug is made from roasting the stems of the solanaceous shrub *Duboisia Hopwoodii*, (commonly known as pituri).



This would have been better than anything Dr Beckler could have prescribed. But he was not there anymore to look after their wellbeing.

Offering this pituri to a stranger is considered by the aboriginal as the greatest expression of friendship. Our three adventurers did not know this and were reluctant to accept the disgusting looking balls of chewed grass. King describes this drug as follows: "After chewing it for a few minutes, I felt quite happy and perfectly indifferent about my position, in fact much the same effect as might be produced by two pretty stiff nobblers of brandy. After chewing it the natives do not throw it away but place it behind the ear until it has lost all goodness."

Burke and Wills were now treated extremely well by the aborigines. They were fed until they could not eat anymore. Fish and fat rats were baked in the skin and considered to be very tasty. (What they called rats may well have been bandicoots.) The two spent the night in a gunyah, a native hut, specially prepared for them. Next day, 8 May, the very day that Brahe and Wright were at the depot, Burke rejoined King and Wills scouted by himself. When Wills rejoined Burke and King he found them cutting up meat of Rajah, which had been shot as he was unable to get onto his feet. The cutting was done using two broken knives and a lancet, which was all there was left to do this job.

Burke realized that the natives were surviving on fish and nardoo cakes and since their own provisions were running low, he wanted to learn from his friendly hosts how the nardoo cakes were made. *Marsilea drummondii* is a common and widespread fern of wetland areas across inland Australia. When the seeds are pounded on a flat, hollowed-out stone, flour is produced which is worked up into a paste and baked in the ashes of a campfire. However after a day's work of gathering and grinding the seed, this will only produce a small handful of cakes.

They found living like the aborigines very relaxing after the hard struggle from the Gulf of Carpentaria. But to their horror their hosts had disappeared overnight and they were on their own again without horse or camel to carry their provisions.

15 May they packed up, each with a 30 pound pack on his shoulders and Burke and King also carrying a billy of water. Their planned rations were nardoo cakes and three sticks of meat each per day. They were going to leave the creek area and cross the thirty or forty miles of plains to reach Mt Hopeless. (Mt Hopeless was named by Edward Eyre in 1840). Would they find water along the way, they wondered. Eight miles were covered the first day and it was decided to leave some of their stores behind. Their packs were too heavy. For six days they travelled across a featureless plain without finding any water. Forty-five miles had been covered without reaching Mt Hopeless. It was now decided to return to the Cooper and what they considered safety.

When back at their old camping ground they were given false hope by a natural event. A piece of rock, splitting off some distant cliff made a noise like a gun being fired. Was a rescue party coming towards them? Were they at their old depot on Cooper's Creek? Wills volunteered to go with five days' rations, a shovel and his diaries. On the way he caught up with friendly aboriginals again, who took him to their camp and offered him shelter in a gunyah, keeping fires going allnight. Wills reached depot LXV after four days and found no one there. He dug up the cache and found it like they had left it. Sitting down in desperation he wrote a letter as follows:

'Depot Camp, May 30.

We have been unable to leave the creek. Both camels are dead, and our provisions are done. Mr. Burke and King are down the lower part of the creek. I am about to return to them, when we shall probably come up this way. We are trying to live the best we can, like the blacks, but find it hard work. Our clothes are going to pieces fast. Send provisions and clothes as soon as possible.

W. J. Wills.'

And as a PS he wrote bitterly: "The depot party having left, contrary to instructions, has put us in this fix. I have deposited some of my journals here for fear of accidents."

The letter and journals placed in the box, he shovelled soil over it again. Disappointed, tired and without food Wills struggled back to the camp where the aboriginals had been so friendly. He found it deserted but was lucky enough to find a large fish, which he cooked and ate. He slept that night under some bushes and was woken up next day by shouting. It turned out to be one of the aboriginals they had met before, who invited Wills to his campsite where he was served as much cooked fish and nardoo cake as he could eat. This strengthened Wills enough to make it back to his fellow expeditioners and tell them the bad news about the depot and the promising alternative of keeping in touch with the friendly, supportive natives.

## CHAPTER 18

### *The last days of Wills.*

Although the aboriginals kept supplying them daily with fish, their behaviour was causing trouble. They kept entering the gunyah where the ammunition and the few stores they had, were held. When an oilcloth was taken out of the gunyah by one of the natives, Burke ran after him and fired his revolver over the native's head. The oilcloth was dropped, but in the meantime other aboriginals went to King, who at that time was the only one in the camp as Wills had gone to the depot. King was invited to the natives' camp to eat fish. King realised that if he would leave his camp everything in their gunyah would disappear. When King did not accept the invitation the natives became hostile and King had to fire his revolver over their heads to scare them away. This did not frighten them at all. Only when King produced his gun did they run away.

Burke returned and all was peaceful until the night, when a large group of natives turned up, their bodies painted and bringing nets of fish. Burke and King were surrounded and were afraid of being too friendly, having such a large group around them. Burke then told King to fire his revolver, which resulted in the group disappearing.

When Wills returned to his mates he did not at all agree with Burke's opinion about the natives. They were their only chance of survival, he argued, until a rescue party would find them. Wills went over to the aboriginal camp to make peace. He stayed with them for two days. They were hospitable and fed him, but thereafter he was given the message to 'get lost'.

On his return to Burke and King, Wills narrated how he had been received. The next day he went back to the native camp, where he was given breakfast and then again the aboriginals indicated that they were going away and did not want his company. Their last friendly gesture was to give Wills some nardoo for his friends.

About 5 June a major disaster struck. Burke was cooking some fish when sparks of the fire ignited the dry branches of the gunyah. The only things rescued from their stores was a gun and a revolver.

Next day they moved over to the deserted aboriginal camp where they found a field of ripening nardoo. Without their 'friends' the threesome were quite desolate. Their daily activity consisted now in Wills and King collecting nardoo, while Burke pounded enough for their dinner. Wills, after a few days was so weak that he was unable to go with King and Burke was in the same boat, not being able to pound the nardoo. This left King to do both the collecting and pounding. He was incapable to do that for long. His legs were very weak and painful and he had to remain in camp where they consumed six days' provisions they had stored.

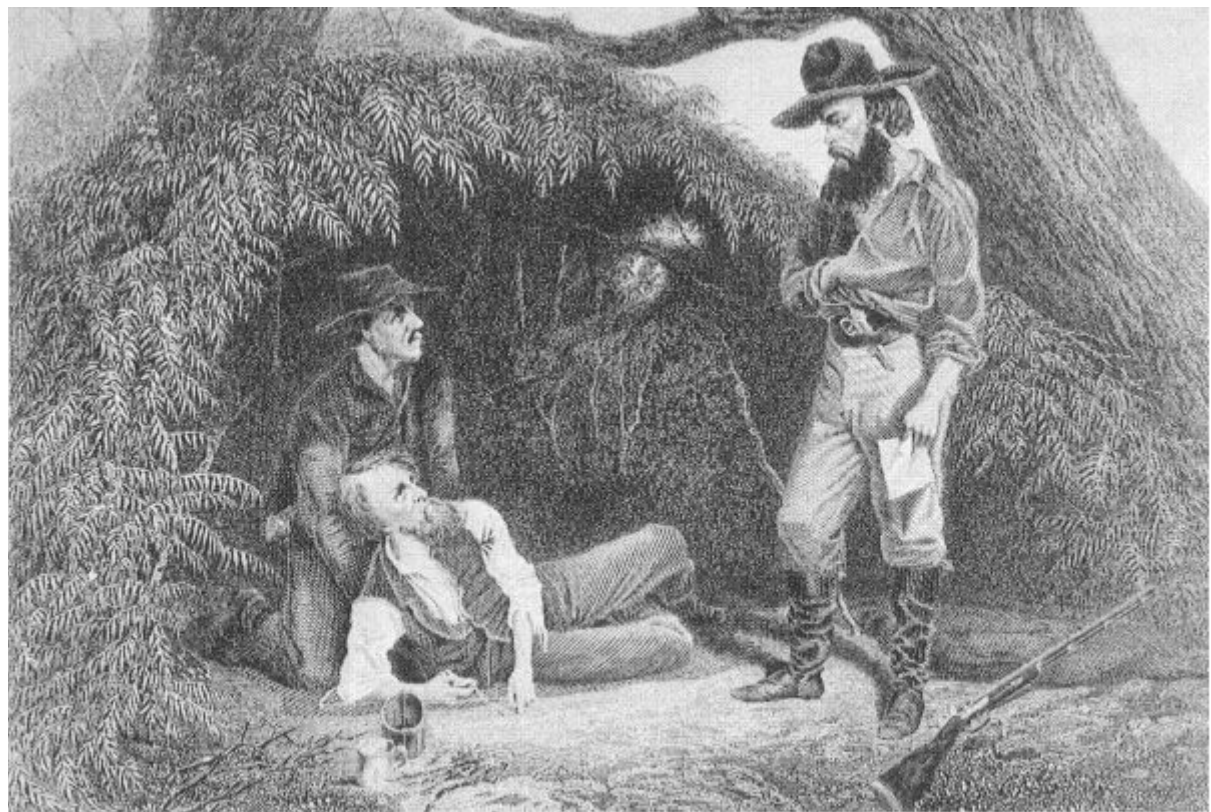
In the third week of June the nights were getting very cold. Their shelter was a native hut, in which they huddled together miserably. This could not go on. Wills was now the weakest of the three and insisted that their only salvation lay in Burke and King to look for the aboriginals while he remained in the hut with some food until their return. After some discussion this was agreed upon.

Wills wrote in his diary: 'Unless relief comes.....I cannot possibly last more than a fortnight. It is a great consolation.... to know that we have done all we could, and that our deaths will rather be the result of mismanagement of others than any rash acts of our own. Had we come to grief elsewhere we could only have blamed ourselves; but here we are, returned to Cooper's Creek, where we had every reason to look for provisions and clothing, and yet we have to die of starvation, in spite of the explicit instructions given by Mr. Burke, that the depot party should await our return, and the strong recommendation to the Committee that we should be followed up by a party from Menindee.'

For a few days King collected nardoo while Burke pounded it until there was enough for two days supply for Burke and King and eight days for Wills. The nardoo alone is not very nutritious and even if they would have had a good supply of fish, it would not have given them back their strength.



Wills checked his pulse. Only forty-eight. His arms and legs were nearly skin and bone. The clothing he had left consisted of a wideawake (hat), a merino shirt, a regatta shirt without sleeves (T-shirt), the remains of a pair of flannel trousers, two pairs of socks in rags, and a waistcoat. Feeling the end of his life near at age 27, he wrote a letter to his father. It's remarkable that in his condition he still wrote clearly with a steady hand, without spelling errors. He finished the letter with: 'You have great claims on the Committee for their neglect. I leave you in sole charge of what is coming to me, the whole of my money I desire to leave to my sisters. I think to live about four or five days. My religious views are not the least changed and I have not the least fear of their being so. My spirits are excellent.' Wills showed his marvellous character by reading aloud to Burke and King what he had written to his father; that he had written nothing to their disadvantage. Handing Burke the letter and his gold watch, he asked them to be passed on to his father. King promised that he would take good care of them if Burke died before he did. Burke was still reluctant to leave Wills behind and asked him again if that was what he wanted. Yes, Wills said, it was their only chance of survival. Wills' field-books were buried near the hut. Firewood, water and nardoo cakes were placed close at hand before Burke and King left.



*Printed by Scott, Melbourne.*

London Richard Bentley, 1863

*Engraved by J. Saddle.*

#### THE LAST HOURS OF M<sup>r</sup> WILLS.

*Illustration 11. The last hours of Wills. Engraving by J. Saddle*

## CHAPTER 19

### *Burke and King alone.*

Not long after they left Wills, Burke complained about pain in his back and legs. He was still distressed about leaving Wills behind. Next day Burke collapsed several times, telling King that he could go no further. King successfully persuaded him to continue, after Burke had thrown away all he was carrying. King also threw away some items but kept a gun, some powder and shot, matches and a small pouch. They only went a little further before deciding to camp. King found some nardoo plants, pounded them and shot a crow for dinner. After the meal Burke told King that he would not last many hours and gave him his watch and a note-book. In this note-book Burke had written in pencil in an almost illegible way:

'I hope we shall be done justice to. We have fulfilled our task, but we have been aban.... We have not been followed up as we expected, and the depot party abandoned their post. King behaved nobly. I hope that he will be properly cared for. He has stayed with me to the last, and placed the pistol in my hand, leaving me lying on the surface as I wished. June 28th.'

Burke knew that King did not have the strength anymore to dig a grave for him. Next day he died in the presence of King, who remained at Burke's side for a few hours before leaving, realising it was no good staying there.



*Illustration 12. Death of Robert O'Hara Burke, painting by Arthur Loureiro , 1892.*

## CHAPTER 20

### *Now only King.*

23 year old King went looking for the aboriginals. The nights he spent in deserted wurleys (a sort of windbreak made by the aboriginals out of branches) and in one of them he was lucky enough to find nardoo to last him a fortnight. He rested for a few days and then returned to Wills with some crows he had shot, but his friend had died. King buried him. He noticed that the natives had been around and taken some of Wills's clothes. After staying in the hut for a few days King followed the footprints of the natives. After shooting some crows and hawks, the aboriginals appeared, hearing the noise of the gun. They took the birds and cooked them for him. Again these primitive people were friendly hosts to King, offering to share a gunyah. From sign language King understood that the natives were aware that he was the sole survivor. They looked after him for four days after which they got enough of King. He gave the impression not to understand them and when the group left, he followed them to their next camp. After King shot some crows, they were only too happy to cook and share them. A woman, whom he had given part of a crow, gave him in return a ball of nardoo and indicated that she would gladly give him more if only her arm was not so sore, preventing her from pounding the nardoo. When King looked at that arm he had the bright idea of trying to cure her arm. Boiling water first, he spunged her arm while the group was looking attentively what he was doing. Her husband by her side, King applied some nitrate of silver (known to have anti-septic properties). The couple was apparently very appreciative of King's treatment of the arm, for from then on they gave him every morning and night some nardoo. They also invited him to join them whenever they went fishing. Everytime they shifted camp, the couple would help him build a wurley and King, in return, would shoot crows and hawks for them. Once they indicated that they would like to see Burke's remains. They became rather distressed looking at the dead 'white fellow' and covered the remains with twigs. King was convinced a rescue party was on its way and made this known to his hosts. He was really treated as one of them.

## CHAPTER 21

### *In the mean time, what was Wright doing at his waterhole camp?*

We will start at 13 May, Wright and Brahe were back at the waterhole explaining to their companions that they were going back to Menindee and the reasons why. Of necessity they travelled slowly constantly on the look-out for water. Two of the camels had to be abandoned and the others suffered from scab.

Early June Patton passed away and was buried. It was 18 June when they finally arrived at Menindee.

To summarize Wright's expedition to take the stores to the Cooper's Creek Depot: four men had died; thirteen camels and twenty-three horses remained and most of the stores had been brought back to Menindee.

Wright was arguing that it was all Burke's own fault. He was dead, he said. What would have been the use of him waiting at the Cooper's Creek Depot with three or four months provisions? The others did not agree with him, still believing that Burke's party had been picked up by a vessel somewhere on the North coast or gone back through Queensland. Wright now dictated to Hodgkinson a report to the Committee in which he changed his tune somewhat. He said that Burke had only taken 12 weeks' rations and unless the Committee had been advised that Burke had arrived safely somewhere, they better send a rescue party as soon as possible. Wright also suggested to the Committee that a vessel be sent to the Gulf of Carpentaria just in case Burke was detained on the coast.

Wright did not avail himself to be part of a rescue party as his presence was urgently needed in Adelaide. He left without much ado to join his wife and Brahe was left to take the bad news to the Committee in Melbourne.

## CHAPTER 22

*Rescue parties are being organized: the ships "Victoria", "Firefly" and "Sir Charles Hotham", Howitt, Landsborough, Walker and McKinlay.*

By the middle of June 1861 the lack of correspondence from the expedition had the Melbourne press rife with speculation about the fate of the explorers. The Exploration Committee was prompted by the negative press to do something. A Contingent Expedition was required. They appointed Alfred Howitt as leader, Edwin James Welch as surveyor, Alexander Aitkin, who had been exploring with Howitt before and William Vinning. Howitt was an excellent choice. He probably would have done a better job than Burke.

Howitt was born in England in 1830. He was intelligent, an anthropologist, geologist and an excellent bushman. The Committee instructed Howitt to go to Menindee, to find out what happened to the expedition and offer any assistance required. He was to buy sixteen horses along the way.

Howitt's party left Melbourne on 26th June 1861 by train to Woodend and then the Cobb & Co coach. At one of the coach stops at the Durham Ox Inn they met William Brahe, who was heading in the opposite direction to Melbourne with the bad news that the Depot at Cooper's Creek had been abandoned, Wright had been back in Menindee and then gone to Adelaide. Burke had taken off to the Gulf some six months ago. Nothing had been heard of him since. Howitt realised that the situation had completely changed. Welch, Aitkin and Vinning were left at the pub, while Howitt and Brahe went to Melbourne to get advice from the Committee to assemble a larger rescue party.

It was a big blow to the Committee to hear what had happened; four men dead and Burke missing since 16 December. Committee members were concerned what the press would make of it. Was anyone to blame?

Brahe was critically questioned. Why had he left Cooper's Creek before his provisions were exhausted? Why didn't he let Wright know long ago? Why didn't he keep a diary? Where did he think Burke was now? Brahe kept his cool, answered these and many other questions honestly and got the Committee off his back. He was told to write a diary of events at Cooper's Creek from his basic notes. One of the Committee members made the suggestion that Burke's party may be suffering from scurvy, may still be alive and unable to move far. Perhaps they were waiting for the rainy season. "Although we must necessarily feel anxious, there is no ground for despairing at all."

It was Howitt who broke the ice by handing over a letter with his suggestions of what should be done. Brahe had offered to accompany Howitt to Menindee. He would be a valuable asset, been there, done that. In Menindee the camels and horses should have recuperated sufficiently by now. If they took five to six months' stores with them they could make it quickly to the Cooper, now that it was winter. From the Cooper, he suggested, they should follow Burke's track to Eyre Creek.. From then on circumstances would dictate what should be done.

The Exploration Committee was a REAL committee, it could not make up its mind! A sub-committee should be formed, yes, no. Motion after motion was passed, and the committee finished up deciding to meet next day again. That night Brahe wrote his diary which was read out by one of the committee members the next day. The members were put under extreme pressure to do something by the morning's newspapers. The Melbourne *Age* concluded that "The whole expedition appears to have been one prolonged blunder; it is hoped that the rescuing party may not be mismanaged and retarded in the same way as the unfortunate original expedition was." The newspaper also urged the committee to send a second rescue party by ship to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The Committee finally made up its mind: it was going to forget about all its motions and directions. Howitt was given a free go.

Howitt was given a supply of anti-scurvy medicines for the party. He was also handed a letter for Burke, expressing the committee's concern of him and letting him know the appointment of Howitt. Howitt made it clear to the committee that if he met Burke, he would not be under Burke's orders. He would continue to control his own party.

Howitt's party now had William Brahe, second in command and Dr. William Wheeler as medical officer. Added were also Weston Phillips, N.H. Calcutt and H.M. Sampson.

At the prompting of the *Age*, a steam-driven sailing sloop of 580 tons, with a crew of 158 named *Victoria* was ordered to go to the Albert River on the Gulf of Carpentaria. The ship was to be accompanied by the sailing-brig *Firefly*. A concerned citizen by the name of James Orkney offered the use of his 16-ton steamer *Sir Charles Hotham*, which, it was thought, could be handy searching the shallow rivers on the Gulf. This last vessel left on 6 July, expected to be overtaken by the two larger vessels. But this never happened as she ran aground north of Sydney.

The concern for the whereabouts of Burke and his party was now front page news all over Australia. Queensland arranged to have the wellknown explorer William Landsborough, born in Scotland in 1825, involved. William was a fiercely independent explorer, an experienced bushman and excellent horseman. Second in charge was volunteer George Bourne, who was an old squatter (farmer occupying land without legal rights). Included were also two aboriginals. This party together with thirty horses were to board the *Firefly* in Brisbane on its way to the Albert River.

Yet another party was led by Frederick Walker, a highly controversial character, who, in New South Wales, had been in charge of a squad of mounted aboriginal police. Because of his ruthless handling of the natives, which were causing concern to farmers, he had been dismissed. However, not to be stopped, he continued under his own steam 'helping' farmers with his band. Walker was to leave from Rockhampton to go overland in the direction of Albert River, trying to find a trace of Burke. Captain Norman of the *Victoria* was to keep an eye out for Walker near the Albert River and supply him with stores. Arrangements were made for the *Victoria* to fire a gun each night at 8, followed half an hour later by a signal rocket. At 9 a blue light was to be sent up. The *Victoria* was to remain as a base-ship in the Gulf for six months, Norman was to be the coordinator of the Queensland parties. The *Victoria* and the *Firefly* left Melbourne on 4 August to reach Brisbane in a week's time.

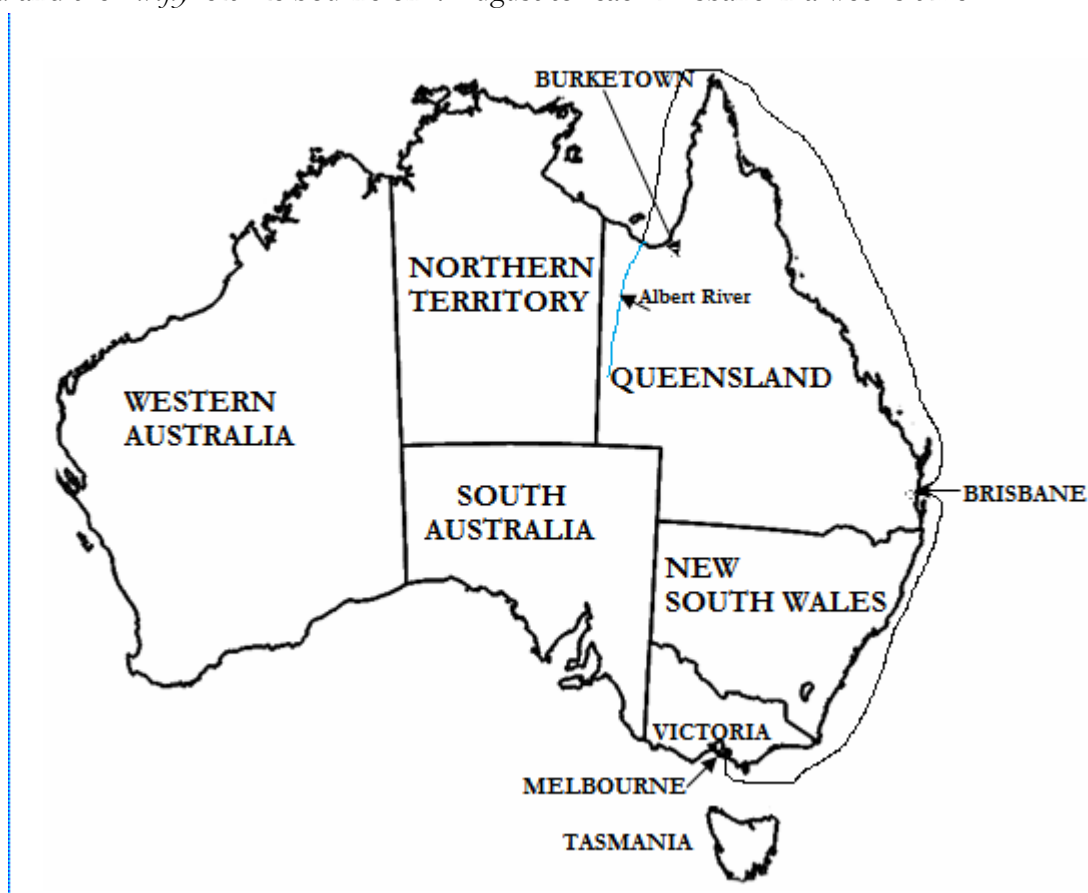


Illustration 13. Route taken by the *Victoria* and *Firefly* to the Albert River.

As if that was not enough South Australia got also involved in a rescue attempt. John McKinlay, a 42 year old Scot was going to be the leader. He happened to be in Melbourne when Brahe returned and learned all that was known about Burke's movements. On his return to Adelaide McKinlay learned that Hodgkinson had arrived there from Medindee. The latter joined the party as a surveyor and second in command of the South Australian rescue party. Others in the party were four men and two aboriginal trackers. They were taking with them twenty-two horses. Coincidentally, two of the camels that Wills had lost north of Cooper's Creek eight months' earlier, turned up near Mount Hopeless and were found to be in a surprisingly good condition. They were added to the party in Adelaide as were two camels brought in from Melbourne by steamer.

When McKinlay led his party from Adelaide on 16 August, he was under instructions from the South Australian Government to move to Cooper's Creek. Regardless of him meeting Howitt there, he was to continue northwards and while there, not to forget looking for gold, minerals and precious stones.

John McKinlay's party was the fifth, sent out to rescue Burke. He, Howitt, Landsborough and Walker were all experienced bushmen.

The main differences between Burke's party and the rescue parties were that the latter were led by experienced bushmen and by the size of their parties; small, very mobile and very quickly organized.

## CHAPTER 23

### *Howitt's rescue effort.*

At the Durham Ox Inn Welch, Aitkin and Vining joined Howitt's party. They travelled through Swan Hill on 13 July, Howitt then swam the horses across the Darling at Menindee on 30 July. Here he took on stores to allow for five to six months requirements. 14 August he left Menindee with thirty-seven horses and seven camels following Burke's route through Torowoto. Brahe was a big help showing the route and the party reached Cooper's Creek in only twenty-five days. Of course, they had the benefit of travelling in the best time of the year and were guided by Brahe who knew the way.

Howitt who had the experience of living off the land, made sure quantities of fish were hooked, pigeons roasted on the camp fire and crayfish and mussels collected from the waterholes. Taking well care of themselves they now tried to find any traces of fresh camel tracks on the way to depot LXV. This was easier said than done, as it was nine months since Burke's disappearance. They encountered some aboriginals every now and then. The two black trackers in Howitt's party could unfortunately not understand them. However they indicated that the party should continue along the Cooper. Did they know what Howitt was looking for?

13 September they arrived at the depot, which Brahe declared was undisturbed. No fresh blazes on the trees, only evidence of aboriginal visits. To everybody's surprise later in time, the cache was not dug up. Howitt simply explained this as "we had ample supplies, no need to open the cache". After a short while they continued in the direction Burke had taken towards the Gulf.



## CHAPTER 24

### *King has been found and tells what had happened.*

One morning Howitt, accompanied by Sandy, one of the black trackers, went scouting ahead. They came upon a large waterhole with lots of camel tracks and of one horse. On the other side of the water were native huts and one aboriginal gesticulating that Howitt should go to that side and the direction he should take. As he was now some distance away from the rest of the party, Howitt went back and was met by some members of his party who had great news: King had been found! It was Welch, a surveyor in the party who had been called by aboriginals, indicating that Welch should go to them on the otherside of the creek. A person covered in rags said that his name was King. This name did not ring a bell straight away with Welch, as King had not been a prominent member of Burke's party. Only when King explained that he was the last man of the exploring expedition did Welch realize, that he had found what they had been looking for.

It was obvious that King was in very poor health, burnt by the sun, half demented by starvation and loneliness, skin and bones, a living scarecrow. The aboriginals were sitting around, obviously happy and satisfied that their visitor had been found by his fellow white people.

Howitt made camp and King was laid down in a tent. Dr. Wheeler examined King and declared later that King would not have lasted more than a few days. After a diet of rice, sugar and butter King was able to explain the next morning what had happened. Howitt was recording everything said in fear that King would pass away. Brahe could not believe his ears. King showed a pocket book that he had kept all this time in a small canvas bag around his neck, together with two watches and Will's letter to his father. The pocket book was Burke's, which was given to King with the wish to have it handed to the committee.



*Illustration 14. John King 1838 -1872*

## CHAPTER 25

### *Visiting Wills' and Burke's last resting places.*

After two days' recuperation King led the party to Will's grave, seven miles away. They found that dingoes had dug up Wills' body and mangled it. Arms and legs were scattered about and the skull missing. All body parts were carefully collected and placed in a new grave. Not having a prayer-book with him, Howitt read Chapter XV of 1 Corinthians to show his last respect to Wills' remains. On a nearby tree Howitt marked

W J WILLS  
XLV Yds  
WNW  
A.H.

They dug up Wills' field-books and a note-book belonging to Burke. Various articles lying around were also taken.

Four carrier pigeons had lost some of their tail feathers in the cages. To enable them to fly, tails from several crested pigeons were inserted in their stumps, the splices fastened with waxed threads. Messages were attached to their legs. The messages apparently did not get far. Large kites did not like the intruders and feathers were found not long after.

King was exhausted, but was able to explain to Howitt where Burke's body could be found. While Dr. Wheeler looked after King, Howitt left on 21 September to the place about eight miles distance to find Burke's body had also been scavenged by dingoes. This time hands and feet were missing. Burke's revolver lay nearby, rusty, cocked and capped. The body was wrapped in a flag and placed in a grave. Howitt read the eleventh chapter of St. John and carved on a nearby tree:

R O'H B  
21 9 '61  
A. H.

## CHAPTER 26

### *Howitt's attitude towards aboriginals.*

When King was being looked after so well by the aboriginals he had indicated to them, that white fellows would be coming to rescue him and that they would be rewarded with tomahawks. The natives were looking forward to that. They found a friend in Howitt, who did his very best to show his friendship towards them. He rode to their camp and showed what he brought with him as samples: a tomahawk, knife, comb, looking glass, beads, flour and sugar. Howitt made it known that he invited the whole tribe to come to his campside the next morning to receive presents. This they did, thirty men, women and children. King helped out getting the natives all seated to receive their presents. Old Carraway, mentioned before in this story, who had fed King and had been medically helped by King, was especially loaded with presents. 50 pounds of flour was divided amongst them. Sugar was straight away eaten. They had a ball! Some old clothes were put on some men and women. When they went back to their own camp, they were the best of friends.

When they experienced problems with pilfering by other tribes, Howitt managed to learn a few words in their language and reasoned with them.

When Dr. Wheeler noticed a youngster with a broken arm, he was able to fix it, much to the appreciation of the locals.

## CHAPTER 27

### *Off to Menindee.*

While waiting for King to get his strength back, the party was busy catching lots of fish, shooting birds and shoeing the horses , which was a difficult job with the primitive forge they had. 25 September Dr. Wheeler declared King fit enough to travel, at a slow pace at first. This to enable King to get used again to riding a camel. Three days later they arrived at depot LXV and the decision was made to now dig up the cache. The contents were removed: Wills' field-books and the note he had cached at the end of May, Burke's letter written on his return from the Gulf, a few map tracings, some notebooks and a tin containing letters.

King was not comfortable riding on a camel's back and after a day's rest, he was transferred to horseback. But he still had to be looked after with much care.

11 October Brahe and a companion were sent ahead. Reaching Bendigo on 2 November, Brahe sent a telegram to Melbourne to report the latest news.

The main party arrived at Menindee on the 28th of October. Sunday 3 November Brahe arrived in Melbourne at Spencer Street Railway Station. He brought with him the journals and letters removed from the cache at depot LXV.

## CHAPTER 28

### *King is taken to Melbourne. Jubilation everywhere.*

King was given a week to recover in Menindee and left on 6 November for Melbourne under the care of Welch. This was the way Howitt preferred. No fanfare for him. After writing his reports and putting his camp in order he took his time to return to Melbourne.

King's survival was celebrated everywhere he went on the way to Melbourne. Near Swan Hill he was taken off his horse, put in a buggy and taken to a public reception in the courthouse. Embarrassed, confused, silent, King had to listen to speeches, toasts and stare at the wine poured out for him. He did not drink.

Next day was not much better for King. He was loaded onto a Cobb and Co. coach and when they arrived in Bendigo, King stayed out of sight in the coach while Welch was mistakenly taken as the hero. When King was noticed, he was taken inside the Shamrock Hotel where he was toasted again and asked to make a speech. This was too much for him and he sat down in tears. Welch came to the rescue by locking King in his bedroom. Castlemaine was next, covered in decorations. People were waving everywhere. At Woodend a special coach was decorated to take King and Welch by train to Melbourne where every Tom, Dick and Harry had assembled to greet their lost son.

The carefully arranged reception did not go as planned. Wills' father was causing a lot of trouble, interfering all the time. Welch had to protect King who was close to collapsing on the spot. King spent the night at his sister's house, exhausted.

## CHAPTER 29

### *What do we do now? Who is to blame for this disaster?*

Howitt quietly slipped into Melbourne a few days after Welch and King. A public funeral, surely, was called for. But there were no bodies. Howitt was asked and agreed to go back to collect them. After Brahe's telegram was read and the impact it would have, realized, the city fathers of Melbourne set up a Royal Commission of inquiry. Their brief was to enquire into:

- the circumstances connected with the sufferings and death of Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills
- the true causes of this lamentable result of the expedition
- especially to investigate the circumstances under which the depot at Cooper's Creek was abandoned by William Brahe and his party on the 21st day of April last
- who was responsible for the supply of provisions and clothing for the explorers on their return from the Gulf and for their support until they could reach the settlements
- the general organization and conduct of the expedition
- claims upon the Colony of the surviving members of the expedition and of the relatives of the deceased members.

There was an enormous interest in the enquiry. The newspapers had a ball. The public took sides. Dr. Wills caused a stir again. This time by handing over to the Press the last letter from his son, when he was so distressed at depot LXV, blaming nearly everybody.

It was a problem for the commissioners to get hold of witnesses. Wright refused to come unless compensated £100 expenditure. Hodgkinson was somewhere in the centre of Australia, Dost Mahomet had been injured by a camel in Menindee. Eventually most of the important witnesses turned up.

To sum up the outcome of this Royal Commission:

- Burke should not have divided his party in Menindee
- Burke should not have appointed Wright
- Burke should have secured communication with the settlements
- Wright appears to have been reprehensible in the highest degree
- The grave responsibility of not having left a larger supply of provisions and clothing in the cache at Cooper's Creek rests with Wright
- The Committee, in overlooking the importance of the contents of Burke's despatch from Torowoto, and in not urging Wright's departure from Menindee, committed errors of a serious nature
- Brahe should have remained at the depot until the return of Burke or relieved from Menindee. However, in the opinion of the Commission, too much had been expected from Brahe. He had acted from a conscientious desire to do his duty. The painful reflection that 24 hours further perseverance would have made him the rescuer of the expedition, must be an agonising thought to him
- Burke should have given written instructions to his officers and kept a regular journal. This would have left little doubt in judging the conduct of his subordinates.
- The commission deplores greatly the lamentable result of this costly expedition and regrets the absence of a systematic plan of operations by Burke. His gallantry and daring and the fidelity of Wills and King are admired. Their deep sympathy is expressed with the deplorable sufferings and untimely deaths of Burke and his mates.

## CHAPTER 30

*Howitt collects the remains. The funeral takes place. The accountants total the bill.*

Howitt travelled in the hottest and driest time of the year to dig up and place in boxes Burke's and Will's remains. Again it proves how capable a man he was, covering the distance from Cooper's Creek to Mount Hopeless in a fortnight. He continued to Adelaide and reached Melbourne by sea at the end of December 1862.

Burke and Wills (the other diseased members of Burke's party did not matter?) remains were buried with much fanfare on 21 January 1863.

Accounts for payment:

King £3135 invested to give a return of £180 per year

Wills' mother £2090

Wills' two sisters each £500

Dr. Wills £150 for passage back to England

Dost Mahomet who had lost an arm in Menindee £200

Welch £200 compensation for an injured eye

Ellen Doherty, Burke's old nurse £1045

Total cost of the expedition £60,000

It was found that Burke's bank account totalled 7 shillings and 8 pence. He owed the Melbourne Club £ 18 5s 3d. which was paid for by the Committee after a long harassment.

## CHAPTER 31

### *What happened to the rescue parties.*

#### *The 'Victoria', 'Firefly' and Landsborough.*

The ships *Victoria* and *Firefly* sailed to Brisbane where the *Firefly* took on board thirty horses, "wretched, half-starved animals", according to the ships captain. Also taken were provisions for the parties of Landsborough and Walker, as well as various stores for the expedition and the explorers themselves with their native guides.

Both ships left Brisbane, sailing closely together until they experienced an incredible storm and they lost sight of each other.

The *Firefly* became stranded on Sir Charles Hardy Island in the Coral Sea and was in dire trouble, considered a total loss. Somehow the crew and expeditioners managed to get ashore and by cutting a hole in the side of the wreck, 25 horses were let out safely. Stores were also retrieved. Plenty of grass enabled the horses to put on weight.

When the *Victoria* turned up, a vital decision had to be made as there was no room on the *Victoria* for the horses. Abandoning the horses meant an end to the rescue mission, which was not really acceptable. It was decided to repair the wrecked *Firefly*, return the horses to this vessel and tow it behind the *Victoria*. In that way they continued their voyage to the Gulf of Carpentaria. Once there the ships went to Sweet's Island, camp was set-up and the Landsborough party was taken to the mainland to a place now called Normanton, after the captain of the *Victoria*. Stores for both Landsborough and Walker parties were dropped off at the Albert River.

15 November 1861 Landsborough left the Gulf and travelled around the area of the Albert River and down to present day Camooweal. In February he learned that his fellow rescuer Frederick Walker had found Burke's tracks near the Flinders River. Landsborough went to that river to look for any traces of Burke. While in the area he assessed the suitability of the land for grazing. On his way south he learned that Howitt had recovered Burke's remains. It was October 1862 when he finally returned to Melbourne and was praised as the first explorer to cross Australia from north to south. His favourite appraisal of the land he had seen caused a mad rush for the Gulf country. For this he was later awarded £2000.

#### *Frederick Walker.*

Walker had left Rockhampton in September 1861, gone in a westerly direction towards the Barcoo River and then northwest towards the Flinders River. Here he found camel tracks which indicated to him that Burke's party had reached its goal. He then went on to the Albert River where his stores had been dropped off by the '*Victoria*'. After replenishing his stores in the first week of December 1861, he returned to civilisation.





*Illustration 15. Explanatory map of route taken by ships Victoria and Firefly*

*John McKinlay.*

McKinlay had left Adelaide on 16 August 1861 for Kapunda. Travelling north he crossed the Cooper and on 20 October 1861 found human remains. He thought to have found the burial ground of all members of Burke's party, but it turned out to be Gray's grave. The place was named Lake Massacre.

Hodgkinson went back to Blanche Water to pass on the news of the discovery and at the same time collect rations for the party. On his return to McKinlay he brought the news of King's rescue and the demise of Burke and Wills.

McKinlay's party then continued north to the Gulf hoping to catch up with the *Victoria* and fresh stores, but they arrived too late. Captain Norman had left. 21st of May McKinlay with his provisions dangerously low, headed for the Queensland coast and returned to Adelaide by ship. McKinlay had been a resourceful leader who had accomplished, without the loss of life of any member of the party, this yearlong expedition under trying conditions.

# ON THE DEATH OF BURKE AND WILLS

by M. Davis

Far in the untrod wilderness,  
Upheld by firm endeavour,  
Alone with nature's awfulness,  
They passed from earth for ever.

No throbbing hearts around their bed,  
Low on the parched earth lying,  
The crested pigeon flew o'er head  
Unmindful of the dying.

They went in proud undaunted mood  
Earth's meaner spirits shaming  
To plant their feet where none had stood,  
The desert wilds reclaiming.

Bold pioneers! The unknown land,  
Perils and dangers braving,  
Till given a tomb by friendly hand,  
Which came too late for saving.

How oft upon the light winged breeze,  
Their fancy heard half doubting,  
A welcome step among the trees,  
The voice of human shouting.

How often to the distance lent,  
In wavy undulation,  
Objects like rescue came and went,  
And mocked their expectation.

Weep not. Their mournful passing fame  
Rejects the fruitless weeping,  
And hath each proud heroic name  
In her immortal keeping.

Peace to the brave. Yet hearts shall swell  
To mark the touching story  
How in the wilderness they fell,  
How died the heirs of glory.

With roots the dark-skinned native race,  
The wand'ers sought to cherish;  
The generous savage lost their trace  
And-left by all-they perish.

Peace to the brave, in honour's cause  
Where'er in death repose,  
Whose conduct still through envy's flaws  
The lines of light disclose.

The fervid Austral sun by day  
Lit up their path with splendour.  
And night with glitt'ring starry ray,  
So solemn sweet and tender.

## TIMELINE

14 November 1857 first meeting of the Exploration Committee  
20 August 1860 the Victorian Exploring Expedition (VEE) leaves Melbourne  
6 September 1860 VEE arrives at Swan Hill  
16 October 1860 Landells resigns at Menindee, Wills is promoted to 2nd in command  
19 October 1860 Burke's party leaves the Darling  
29 October 1860 Burke's party at Torowoto, Wright returns to the Darling to conduct the remainder of the expedition to Cooper's Creek  
5 November 1860 Wright arrives back at Menindee  
11 November 1860 Burke's party reaches Cooper's Creek ( Depot LXV)  
16 December 1860 Burke, Wills, King and Gray leave for the Gulf. Brahe in charge of depot at Cooper's Creek.  
19 December 1860 Hodgkinson rides to Melbourne and returns to Menindee on 9 January 1861  
26 January 1861 Wright's party leaves Menindee for the Cooper  
9 February 1861 Burke and Wills reach Gulf of Carpentaria area  
17 April 1861 Gray dies, probably near Lake Massacre  
17 April 1861 Burke, Wills and King reach the depot at Cooper's Creek  
21 April 1861 Brahe's party leaves Depot LXV , Burke's party arrives 9 hours later  
28 April 1861 Brahe's party joins Wright's at Bulloo  
8 May 1861 Wright and Brahe return to Depot LXV on the Cooper  
18 June 1861 Wright's party arrives back in Menindee  
26 June 1861 Howitt's relief party leaves Melbourne, on the way he meets Brahe. Howitt returns to Melbourne  
About 28 June 1861 Wills and Burke die along Cooper's Creek  
4 August 1861 the *Victoria* and *Firefly* leave Melbourne on a rescue mission  
14 August 1861 Howitt's relief party, including Brahe, leaves Melbourne  
14 August 1861 Landsborough's party boards the *Firefly* in Brisbane to go to the Gulf  
16 August 1861 McKinlay's rescue party leaves Adelaide  
11 September 1861 Howitt's party reaches Depot LXV on the Cooper  
15 September 1861 King is rescued.  
September 1861 the *Victoria* and *Firefly* arrive in Gulf of Carpentaria  
20 October 1861 McKinlay' party finds the remains of, what is believed, Gray at Lake Massacre  
3 November 1861 Brahe arrives in Melbourne. He reports the death of Burke and Wills and the survival of King  
February 1862 the *Victoria* leaves the Gulf of Carpentaria area to head for home  
December 1862 Wright delivers the remains of Burke and Wills in Melbourne  
21 January 1863 the remains of Burke and Wills are officially buried in Melbourne

## NOTES

Some of the benefits obtained from the Burke and Wills expedition:

The search and rescue expeditions resulted in more knowledge of the Australian outback than in the previous 30 years.

Burke achieved one of the aims of the expedition: to find a route to the Gulf of Carpentaria. This achievement was at the cost of his and other lives, which was an unnecessary waste. Wright and the Exploration Committee were partly to blame.

Burke was a poor choice to lead this expedition

The attitude towards the aboriginals Burke met during the expedition was unwise. 23 year old King showed a lot more sense in this respect. One of the many other Australian explorers with a positive attitude towards the original inhabitants of Australia was Howitt.

Brahe, Howitt and King stand out in their human endeavour in this tragic saga.

King died on 15th January 1872 at age 33 of tuberculosis

McDouall Stuart's many expeditions resulted in:

- the Overland Telegraph Line linking Adelaide - Darwin- London
- the original Central Australia Railway (Ghan) from Adelaide to Alice Springs followed a similar route
- the Stuart Highway linking Adelaide with Darwin follows approximately the route taken by Mc Douall Stuart

Burke and Wills believed the Cloncurry and Flinders Rivers combined to become the Albert River. This was not important to them, but it meant a lot to their rescuers. In 1861 parties went in different directions in search of traces or survivors. As a consequence, Landsborough's and Walker's parties were looking in the wrong place. Landsborough established a depot 20 miles up the Albert River.

Burketown was named after Robert O'Hara Burke

It has been calculated that the Burke and Wills expedition, including the rescue parties, has cost £57,000.

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